Reviews


Reviewed by Raul Sanchez, University of South Florida

At first, reviewing Victor Villanueva's _Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color_ seemed like a good idea. The notion of a Latino writing about another Latino's book in a field where we and other minorities are too few and far between suggested an opportunity to generate some discussion concerning underrepresentation. Remembering the book's wistful first sentence, "I think of how it would be if the numbers of academics of color actually reflected the demographics of the country," I decided to do it. I was convinced that this debate, which has been taking place on campuses and in disciplines across the country, should enjoy a stronger presence in composition than it currently does.

Villanueva writes that one purpose of _Bootstraps_ is to make explicit the idea "that there is more to racism, ethnocentricity, and language than is apparent, that there are long-established systemic forces at play that maintain bigotry, systemic forces that can even make bigots of those who are appalled by bigotry." Doing this requires something other than the usual academic discourse; it requires both the interpretive force of theory and the subtle understanding of experience. Because of this necessity, _Bootstraps_, Villanueva writes, "fits no specific genre." It is a combination of autobiography and theory, narrative and exposition; it is a critical look at how one person of color has traveled through the American educational system. It is not necessarily a success story, not in the way we normally think of such things. The title invokes the familiar American metaphor of individual achievement and determination. However, through personal example and theoretical explication Villanueva lays bare that metaphor's ideological underpinnings and suggests ways we might reconceive our institutions—and the metaphors we contrive to represent them—to make them more truly democratic, more truly inclusive, more truly responsive to difference.

Antonio Gramsci, Paulo Freire, and postcolonial discourse figure as prominent theoretical sources for this text, but the information derived from them is always grounded in or somehow related to Villanueva's experiences as a scholar, as a teacher, as a student, as an American, as a Latino. This is the
book's greatest strength: its insistence on seeing the personal and the theoretical or the intellectual as necessarily intertwined, mutually informing. For too long, we have tended to see experience and personal history as distractions from the "real" business of scholarly inquiry. Autobiography has been considered merely illuminating at best, hopelessly irrelevant at worst. "Yet I can tell of my journey," Villanueva insists, "and I can tell of the theories, some mine, some others', that help to explain such journeys." As such, the very form of *Bootstraps* insists on a more sophisticated understanding of what constitutes knowledge, of what makes for serious intellectual activity. Without lapsing into the sloppy subjectivity which can characterize memoir and thus render it charming but innocuous, Villanueva writes in such a way as to suggest new possibilities for the genre of scholarly writing, new notions of discourse that in the end might constitute a new epistemological perspective on knowledge and on the means by which it is created. He writes: "I am never just emoting, never just displaying the free associative workings of a mind." I think we should see *Bootstraps* as an effort to realize the as yet unexplored possibilities of a postmodern scholarship, an attempt to harness the interpretive power of our various postmodern discourses in order to articulate what Henry Giroux has identified in Paulo Freire’s work as “a politics of literacy forged in the political and material dislocations of regimes that exploit, oppress, expel, maim, and ruin human life” (196).

Throughout the book, Villanueva moves from narrative to exposition to critique as he works to construct a coherent statement based on his experiences, those of others, and on the work of theoreticians from various disciplines. Thus in Chapter IV, “Coming to a Critical Consciousness,” he tells of Walter Myles, whom he met in the army and who introduced him to other African Americans who, like Walter, spoke in abstract political terms about racism and the struggles of people of color, who spoke like academics but in the language of the streets, kind of—calm, unaffected, intellectual Black English. (52)

For Sgt. V, as Villanueva identifies himself at this time, the fact that these men could speak of intellectual, social, and political matters without losing sight of their economic and ethnic roots, and the fact that their status as Americans of color was if anything enhanced by their intellectuality, suggested that education does not have to be a trading in of one set of cultural values for another, as writers like Richard Rodriguez have suggested. As such, this incident presages Villanueva’s discussion of Gramscian organic intellectuals, those who take to “conceptualizing and articulating the social, economic, and political interests of the group or class from which they came.”

This fusion of experience and theory continues with Villanueva’s description of how he was introduced to rhetoric. In discovering past and present rhetorical theory, he comes to understand that the latina’s particular uses of language, which have been used against her by the dominant Anglo
culture much as the language systems of African-Americans have been used against them, do not stem from some deficiency or disadvantage. Instead, Villanueva sees similarities between latino language systems and a rhetorical tradition that can be traced through Spain and its strong Arabic strain, then through Byzantium, then back to the sophists. This discovery of a lineage leads Villanueva to argue, “Nearly two thousand years of certain rhetorical ways, albeit in different languages, are not likely to be overcome in the hundred years and less of English domination, especially when we consider that the rhetorical history of the English, though through another route, mainly Cicero, also gave a kind of sophistry special privilege up to the eighteenth century.” For Villanueva, this historicity of language suggests its ideological and political dimensions. Furthermore, he sees Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Kenneth Burke suggesting in different ways that language is linked to people’s particular uses in particular places at particular times, that as such it is constitutive rather than derivative, that it creates rather than relates knowledge. Villanueva sees this as important information for the latino: “Both historical and empirical research suggest that for Spanish-speakers, or for those exposed to the ways of the Spanish-speaker, those preferred rhetorical ways are fundamentally sophistic.” He makes a connection between this insight and his own writing, noting that when his graduate professors were not citing him for his too rigid adherence to current scholarly formulas as he tried to mimic the contemporary styles, they were warning him about his tendency to be too general, too speculative, too sophistic.

In the process of writing this review, my own sophistic deviance gets questioned: a tendency toward intuitive leaps, apparently irrelevant insights, absurd connections, combinations that sound novel although not based on logical premises. Perhaps such an inclination is good if the idea is to be an organic intellectual in composition, or to be what Villanueva via Gramsci calls a “new intellectual,” one who “acts as an intellectual liaison between the groups seeking revolutionary change and the rest of society.” This is how we can bring the question of minority representation—or rather, minority participation—into composition. I share Villanueva’s desire “to avoid a ghettoizing of this text, to avoid its labeling as simply the story of a person of color, to avoid its being read as yet another fragment.” I believe that non-latinos need to understand both this book and latinos in terms other than the ones they’ve constructed. They need what Burke calls perspective by incongruity, or as I see it, a touch of the sophistic. Organic intellectuals, new intellectuals, make that phenomenon possible.

But the “new intellectual” will pay a high price. Villanueva writes about the insecurity that comes with knowing that his successful movement through the academy’s ranks is due in some measure to his status as a minority, a person of color. He writes of self-doubt, of feeling inferior despite the many affirmations, from superiors and colleagues, of his ability:
He knows that one reason he sits on so many committees is because the system is not yet working, that there is too limited a racial or ethnic pool from which to draw. He is glad to take part, figures he has something to offer, realizes that tokenism does serve a purpose to persons of color, the foot in the door, the possibility for opening the door wide for others of color to enter, the possibility for true equity sometime in the future, as the majority learns that people of color are in many ways, especially professionally, no different from whites, equally committed, equally concerned, equally competent, equal at worst. But he can never be sure, not really, of his own competence, can never be sure if the laurels proffered are more honorary for the colored kid than earned. (120)

It is a similar insecurity that Rodriguez writes of in his book, *Hunger of Memory*. But while these feelings eventually overcome Rodriguez, forcing him to turn down university job offers for fear of tokenism, Villanueva sees beyond the American ideology of individualism that forces one to look inward at the expense of social and cultural exigencies. Today, any person of color in the academy must confront this situation. But the hope is that once enough of us do so, the ones who come after will be spared.

The new intellectual exists in a heterogeneous society wherein oppressed groups seek access to the institutions of power. For Villanueva, colonial theory and postcolonial discourse situate Gramscian ideas about hegemony in a concrete cultural context. Specifically, he writes of internal colonialism in this country, the kind brought to bear on oppressed minorities living in the same national space as their oppressors: "Colonial theory refines the concept of the castelike minority by looking to the common features in the castelike's histories—colonization or colonization's explicitly commodified form, slavery." It "gives a historical precedent and gives a contemporary explanation for how minorities remain castelike, even when racially white, even when white and an expert, a practicing Ph.D. in the language of the dominant." In the United States, the hegemony of the dominant Anglo-American culture is maintained and made to seem natural and inevitable despite the occasional minority success story. In fact, Villanueva argues, the occasional success story helps maintain existing power relations by casting the struggle to achieve in purely individualistic terms. This is the legacy of liberalism, an ideology that "has taken a radical dimension, a point in which collectivities of any sort must perforce become secondary, the needs of the one surpassing the needs of any other one." The bootstrap mentality, the idea that change can and must occur only at the personal level, is reinforced at every turn by political conservatives and liberals alike. These are the terms of political, social, cultural, and economic discourse in the United States. Attempts to question or circumvent these terms are met either with hostility, silence, or colonialism's most effective weapon, which is absorption into the system under the system's terms.

Reviewing this book begins to sound like a bad idea. Contributing to the creation of an "issue," a thing to be discussed, an intellectual commodity like any other, suggests capitulation to the neutralizing force of the colonizing gaze in academia. (Villanueva notes the anemic state of academic Marxism,
of its inability to invoke anything but more academic Marxism.) The subject matter I would try to include in the “scholarly conversation” would be ghettoized. It would be segregated, bled to death by virtue of its status as a “special interest.” This seems to be a feature of the North American knowledge-producing industry. Even the book review editor, well-meaning and truly concerned as Villanueva says most academic liberals are, may be inadvertently contributing, through her position as a gatekeeper in this scholarly community, to the continued dominance of a discursive regime whose methods of maintaining power include coopting the very voices that would question it. But what are the alternatives? A non-latino could be commissioned to review *Bootstraps*, which will most likely be the case in other journals. When that happens, key perspectives might be lost; understandings arising from the ethnic and cultural commonalities many latinos share, despite their specific differences, might not be articulated. Even worse, such a reviewer might represent, inadvertently or otherwise, a further intrusion of the colonizing gaze, a member of the dominant group explaining to other members of the dominant group what the work of this Other scholar means to their field.

One thing seems certain. Someone is going to talk about this book. Someone is going to describe it, explain it, and critique it to an audience made up mostly of white Anglo-American academics. Someone is going to make *Bootstraps* the object of his or her discourse. The rules of scholarly inquiry demand as much. Therefore, any resistance a latino offers in the form of silence will effect no change whatsoever in the sociopolitical landscape of composition studies. But I have rhetoric at my disposal. Villanueva writes that language is the primary means by which to counter hegemony, to establish counter-hegemonies. This is because hegemony's power, based largely on the consent of those oppressed, is fundamentally rhetorical. He writes that because of this, “the classroom is an ideal site in which to affect change; the classroom, where we come in contact with so many, the many who in turn will come in contact with many more.” And I would add that such forums as the scholarly essay, the monograph, and the book review are ideal sites in which to affect change in a narrow and more immediate arena—our field of study.

Villanueva notes the difference between revolution and reform: revolution is the complete overthrow of the system and its replacement by another; reform is adjustment of the system without altering its structural, constitutive elements. For Villanueva, revolution is untenable because it leads to new forms of old oppression, throwing out all that is good with all that is bad. Furthermore, the thorough rhetorical hegemony exercised in this country by the ideology of individualism makes the possibility of any overt mass movement practically impossible. On the other hand, reform represents only short-term solutions to complex and systemic problems, a bandage applied to a gaping wound. It is never enough, and our continued faith in it assures
the survival of a fundamentally flawed system. Thus, Villanueva argues for “something less than armed revolution, something more than reform,” and he sees rhetoric as occupying the space between these positions. Since hegemony’s power is primarily rhetorical, since its perpetuation requires the consent of those in its shadow, to enact counterhegemonic strategies from within the system is to attack hegemony where it lives, to try to transform it from the inside out. Slowly, rhetorically, methodically, we offer alternative visions of what is good and what is possible. We create organic, dialectical links between the dominant order and the oppressed group, between tradition and innovation, between permanence and change, thereby fundamentally altering the means by which the status quo is (re)produced.

Like Richard Rodriguez, Villanueva understands the trauma of assimilation into the dominant culture, whether it be on a broad social level or on a specific professional one. Unlike Rodriguez, however, Villanueva refuses to accept the inevitability of this trauma. He argues that our educational institutions need not encourage the abandonment of our ethnic ways, that instead they should operate dialectically with the specific epistemological and cultural characteristics of any group. Furthermore, by challenging standard procedures for the production of theoretical knowledge, by refusing to become the cool and distant theorist, Villanueva is able to create a text that embodies the ideals and practices that will allow composition scholarship to make a dialectical connection with the various people whose rhetorical schemas it would examine, describe, and ultimately incorporate into its description of reality. In Villanueva’s vision this reality, having now faithfully and accurately incorporated latinos, having been constructed in part by latinos, will more closely approximate the reality envisioned by the millions of people of color who live in this country, and who have come and continue to come to this country, and who want to experience something like democracy and opportunity. While the point is obvious it bears repeating, and it will continue to bear repeating until the hope expressed in Villanueva’s opening sentence is fully realized: there should be more of us in composition, in the academy, in positions of power everywhere. *Bootstraps* suggests ways to make this happen.

Works Cited